

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the committee.

My name is Sharon Heddle and I live in Groton and I am the Executive Director at Disabilities Network of Eastern CT – one of CT's five Independent Living Centers. I am here to speak about the funding for the Independent Living Centers.

We do appreciate the increases we have received over the years, but they have not kept up with inflation and therefore we have not been able to maintain the same level of staffing. The pandemic increased the need and awareness of the services we provide to people with disabilities in our communities. Keeping up with the requests with less staff has been difficult. Tough decisions have had to be made based on the funding we receive. We have not filled positions and we cannot provide the exact same services to all parts of the state without enough staff.

Total state funding to the Independent Living Centers, from all sources, was \$2.36 million last year. Increasing us to \$3.2 million would bring us to a level of maintaining the current services we provide and the staff needed to provide the core services to all of CT, as it should be.

We are all aware of the desperate need for affordable housing in our state. We know a Housing Coordinator at each Independent Living Center is critical to helping our disabled population secure safe and appropriate housing. We ask for funding to hire a staff member, a Housing Coordinator, for each Independent Living Center. This person would be a dedicated housing coordinator who can work in the community to identify accessible or adaptable housing for people with disabilities and assist consumers in securing that housing.

Along with this Housing Coordinator would be a Community Advocate who will work directly with groups of our consumers to ensure the communities they live in are accessible to all people with disabilities.

We ask for \$750,000 for two positions at each Independent Living Center.